ANGLO-ITALIAN RIVALRY IN YEMEN AND 'ASĪR*
1900-1934

BY

JOHN BALDRY

Introduction

Within two years of the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869 the Ottomans had extended their sovereignty over large areas of southwestern Arabia but widespread opposition quickly developed in both 'Asīr and Yemen to Turkish rule. Among the many opponents the Turks had to face in 'Asīr was that of the Idrīṣī family in the large village of Sābyā. From 1904 Sayyid Muḥammad al-Idrīṣī was in a state of continual warfare against the Turks and by the time the First World War broke out he controlled most of the eastern Red Sea coast from a point just south of al-Qunfidah to the vicinity of Jizān in addition to large tracts of the 'Asīr highlands. In 1915 and again in 1917 he concluded treaties with Britain by which he undertook to wage war against the Turks in Yemen and not to “cede, mortgage or surrender” his coastline or the offshore islands “to any foreign Power” and to “call on His Majesty’s Government for assistance if these places are assailed”. In return Britain guaranteed his independence and furnished him with arms, ammunition and financial support.

Upon the Turkish evacuation of Arabia in 1919 Sayyid Muḥammad al-Idrīṣī established his authority as far south as the suburbs of

* References preceded by FO indicate records of the British Foreign Office held in the Public Record Office, London.
  Records preceded by R20 indicate Aden Residency Records held in the India Office Library, London.
  References preceded by L/PS indicate Letters, Private and Secret held in the India Office Library, London.
  AF indicates Archives de France records in Paris.
  HP indicates Hardinge Papers held in Cambridge University Library.
Hodeidah. Two years later Britain acquiesced in Sayyid Muḥammad's occupation of the town of Hodeidah but unsuccessfully urged him not to extend his control southwards thereof. Sayyid ʿAlī succeeded his father in 1923 but was overthrown two years later by Sayyid Ḥasan.

Imām Yahyā had likewise extended his territory after the Turkish withdrawal from Yemen. He was thwarted in his desire to assert imāmic authority over Greater Yemen by the presence of the Idrīsī along the seaboard and the British in the Aden Protectorate. This inevitably led to fighting between the Imām and the Idrīsī and to Yemeni incursions into British held territory. In 1925 Imām Yahyā captured Hodeidah from the Idrīsī and rapidly advanced northwards along the coast to approximately the present day Saʿūdi-Yemeni borders.

Britain, in the meantime, was trying to come to an agreement with Imām Yahyā by which his forces would evacuate parts of the Aden Protectorate: any such settlement was quite impossible so long as Britain continued its support for the Imām’s implacable enemy, the Idrīsī who still occupied parts of Yemeni territory. Britain thus reluctantly abandoned its wartime ally the Idrīsī thereby forcing him to seek assistance and protection from Ibn Saʿūd who gradually sapped any Idrīsī authority. By 1933 Idrīsī territory had been effectively divided between Saʿūdi Arabia and Yemen. Yemeni claims to parts of ʿAsīr under Saʿūdi control contributed in no small way to the outbreak of hostilities between the two countries in 1934 when Saʿūdi troops occupied the Yemeni coast down to and including Hodeidah for a period of six weeks.

It is against this background that Italy tried to undermine the economic and political influence to which Britain aspired in both ʿAsīr and Yemen at the end of the First World War. Britain had hoped to become the most influential, if not the sole European Power, in south-western Arabia but Italy, too, had aspirations in the region—as an economic outlet for Eritrea and for political hegemony. Thus, Britain’s problem was not so much a question of how to keep the Italians out of Yemen, but rather how to limit their influence. This was no easy task, for the Imām, without a treaty with Britain, turned to Italy for arms supplies with which to prosecute military campaigns against dissident tribes, the Idrīsī and the British protected emirates and sultanates of South Arabia.